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Homeland Security Department Gets Better Grades in 2nd Major Test

By ERIC LIPTON

WASHINGTON, Aug. 13 — Right after Hurricane Katrina ripped through the Gulf Coast last year, Michael Chertoff, the homeland security secretary, flew to Atlanta for a conference on bird flu — and then spent months parrying criticism that his department had flunked the first big test of its existence.

Last week, the department confronted a second major test, the arrests in Britain of 24 men suspected of plotting to blow up airliners bound for the United States.

In this case, the initial reviews of Mr. Chertoff's performance have been largely positive. The Homeland Security Department responded quickly to impose new security measures on the fear that some plotters might still be at large.

Questions remain about the agency's bureaucracy and its ability to anticipate threats rather than just react to them. But it is notable that Mr. Chertoff is being praised by some people who once bitterly chastised him or even called for his resignation.

"Until this threat, the department had fallen short of the promise that its creation held," Senator Susan Collins, Republican of Maine and chairwoman of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, said in an interview on Sunday. "This time we saw a crisp, confident and competent response, and Secretary Chertoff was clearly front and center."

Representative Bennie Thompson, Democrat of Mississippi and the minority leader on the House Committee on Homeland Security, said: "He did a credible job. He did not create hysteria among the traveling public. He provided a clear message to the traveling public, and that is positive."

Mr. Chertoff and his agencies — which include the Transportation Security Administration, the air marshals, Customs and Border Protection and other departments involved in the response to the British plot — did not play a role in apprehending the terror suspects.

But ever since Aug. 4, when Mr. Chertoff said he learned that a scheme to bomb planes destined for the United States could unfold before the end of August, his agency has been developing an effort to prevent such an attack, he said in an interview at his office on Sunday.

The work began in secret at the Homeland Security Department headquarters, Mr. Chertoff said, where he and fewer than a half-dozen of his top aides met to devise two plans: what to do if a plot were successful and planes started blowing up, and what to do if arrests were to take place before such a catastrophe unfolded.

The first plan involved a course of action for shutting down national airspace if necessary, similar to what happened after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. It included guidelines for when planes might be turned back to their cities of origin, when they might be allowed to complete their flights or when they would be ordered to land at the closest airport, he said, as well as directions on when taking such steps might be appropriate.

Mr. Chertoff said that British officials had assured the United States that an attack would not be immediate — just that it was close. But officials here were concerned about what might happen if word were to leak about the investigation or if the plotters' activities were to change.

The second plan, which was kept secret until just hours before it was unveiled nationally, included imposing and enforcing the no-liquids rule at airports and deploying more federal air marshals on planes headed to the United States from abroad.

It also involved increasing the use of federal security screeners to observe the behavior of passengers at airports to look for signs that they might be involved in suspicious acts, something Israeli authorities have long done. And it entailed examining passenger manifests for all flights from Great Britain before the planes took off.

The circle of officials involved in the planning was so small that the department's top leaders, like Kip Hawley, the head of the Transportation Security Administration, handled the task of typing briefing materials on a classified computer. The new security measures would be shared only in confidence with others inside the government, including members of Congress, and with senior airline executives starting late Wednesday, after the arrests in Britain were under way.

For Mr. Chertoff, whose post-hurricane trip to Atlanta last year led to criticism that he was an aloof and disengaged manager, there was never any question that he would need to be at the center of this effort. But he acknowledged in the interview that what had happened with the hurricane made this even more critical.

“There were obvious frustrations in Katrina that I relied on others to do something and that turned out that that reliance was misplaced,” he said. “So I

guess to some extent, I have incorporated some of that lesson into what I do going forward.”

Representative Peter T. King, Republican of New York, who has harshly criticized Mr. Chertoff, said that the Homeland Security Department’s ability to institute such a drastic change in checkpoint procedures so rapidly reflected an agency that appeared to have matured in the last year.

“We will have to wait and see, but my impression right now is, with the team in place, the progress will now be geometric, it will move a lot quicker,” Mr. King, chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, said in an interview on Sunday.

Mr. King, Senator Collins and Representative Thompson all said that Mr. Chertoff’s effort in his role as the Bush administration’s public face on security also represented an improvement, not just from the way he handled Hurricane Katrina, but compared with his predecessor, Tom Ridge.

Instead of communicating through dueling appearances by the attorney general, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the homeland security secretary, as sometimes happened during Mr. Ridge’s tenure, this time, the administration seemed to be speaking with a single, clear message, and one that seemed informed and confident, they said.

But critics and senior department officials said there were still considerable grounds for improvement in the agency’s operations.

Since Mr. Chertoff took over in February 2005, for example, the department has not issued fraud-proof identification cards for transportation workers. It has also not completed negotiations to make advance information on passengers on all planes headed to the United States available before they take off, nor has it developed an improved system for screening passenger names automatically on domestic flights.

In addition, senior agency officials acknowledged that the department had been far too slow to use new technologies to help detect liquid or plastic explosives that the equipment now in use might miss.

“Too many things have been left undone,” Mr. Thompson said.

Ms. Collins took issue with Mr. Chertoff’s remarks in a televised interview on Sunday that the United States should consider laws like those in Britain that would allow the authorities to detain terrorism suspects, including Americans, even before charges are filed.

And Representative Edward J. Markey, Democrat of Massachusetts, said in a statement on Sunday that no matter how well orchestrated Mr. Chertoff's response was in the past week, his department was still too narrow minded and reactionary, seeming to shift by the week from a focus on rail security to port security to aviation.

"As a result, the Bush administration seems to lurch from crisis to crisis," Mr. Markey said, "covering yesterday's vulnerabilities but leaving tomorrow's threats wide open to exploitation by terrorists."

Mr. Chertoff said he appreciated any voices of approval after the consistent tongue-lashing he received in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. But he knows the wind could still change direction.

"Certainly, getting praised is better than getting criticized," he said Sunday, after wrapping up appearances on all three major television networks and two cable news programs. "The judgment on my tenure will ultimately be determined over the long term."